

Hospitality Committee
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 81:10, 13, 16
Reading from the Gospels: John 6:1-15

Drive by a Chick-fil-A at lunch or during soccer practice rush hour to see what busy looks like. In fact, health officials across the country did just that as they sought to organize mass testing and vaccination sites during the pandemic. A Chick-fil-A restaurant can go through 690 lbs. of chicken per day. That's potentially 1,440 sandwiches and 2880 pickles, which means, if it was a white bag with a distinctive red cursive logo that the young boy carried to the mountainside, the day he went to see Jesus, they would still have been 3,560 sandwiches short of a picnic.

5000 people coming over for lunch. Even the hall of fame kitchen crew up at the Greek Orthodox cathedral would have found a way to be conveniently out of town on that day. The Open Table site would have crashed, and the Door Dash drivers would have turned in their bags. Southerners get all weepy and sentimental when waxing nostalgic about church homecoming services and dinner on the lawn, but could you imagine someone this morning standing up in the middle of mass next door at St. Matt's, saying, "Hey, let's have a covered dish lunch

today"? I'm thinking the hospitality committee would quickly be finding a use for that cross out in the narthex. 5,000 people!

I've been around church long enough to know that while Jesus may be present wherever two or three have gathered together, one of them is going to be talking about food. I love listening to James Gregory talk about the relationship between food and death. "You give us something to embalm and some tater salad, we can have a funeral."

Without a doubt, a significant percentage of my life in the church has been spent in meetings where food was high on the agenda, not the eating of it, but the discussion of it in regard to anything we plan: Do we cater? Do we charge anything? What about reservations? How many folks do we expect? Do we have a serving line or serve them while seated? Tea? Coffee? Punch? Water bottles? Tablecloths? Will the utensils be environmentally friendly? What will we serve the children? Will the time of the class or program disrupt the dinner routines for young families? Who is setting up the tables? Who will reset the room after the meal?

And those are just the initial details to be addressed. Water bottles or urns? Will there be enough? What about leftovers? ... And we're still just scratching the surface because all of that is pre-Pandemic! Even before Covid we were grappling with concerns about the wisdom of traditional covered dish dinners and the health implications of eating from shared platters prepared in a myriad of uninspected kitchens, with no capacity to monitor allergies and allergens.

You know who I see marching (certainly in an orderly fashion) near the front of the saint parade? The list-making, table-setting, Costco-shopping, flower-arranging, cookie-baking, logistics-mastering, working 'til the lights are out and the doors are locked soldier saints of the hospitality committee. They are on the front lines of the war against chaos. Just ask the apostle Paul, who was tormented by a church without an effective hospitality committee.

Do you remember his letter to the Corinthians? "For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of

God and humiliate those who have nothing?" The problems at Corinth are no different than those faced by any congregation. They just didn't have a decent hospitality committee.

Food is the fuel of fellowship. Mark Twain said, "I know how the nuts taken in conjunction with winter apples, cider, and doughnuts, make old people's tales and old jokes sound fresh and crisp and enchanting." Everyone who has ever served on a church hospitality committee would agree with Virginia Wolff's assertion that one cannot think well if one has not dined well. So, I'd imagine that even before Jesus quizzed Philip, there was already an ad hoc hospitality committee gathered nearby addressing the logistical nightmare of feeding 5000, knowing that if anyone was going to comprehend the good news Jesus would proclaim that day, they would need something in their bellies besides air. For as Oscar Wilde observed, "After a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations."

John reports that when Jesus saw the throng gathering near him, he said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? He said this to test him"

That seems a bit curious to me. For what was the intent of the test? When we think of Jesus testing someone, we would assume it would be a question relating to theology or belief rather than about Philip's awareness of the nearest Harris Teeter or his facility with the logistics of a buffet. Yet, then I realized that Jesus was making a pretty smooth move. Remember Paul's wisdom? "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

Every pastor knows that a top priority when arriving at a new church is to assess what kind of gifts and abilities are to be found within the congregation. You must know this information before you can pursue the particular mission of that congregation. You are not going to ask that faithful and talented, yet, as some would say, humorless and maybe introverted engineer to facilitate the grief support group. This nascent operation of the Galilean rabbi would need logistical masterminds, decorators, chefs, project managers, travel agents, and caregivers. Was Philip's test a prelude to being asked to serve as the chair of the church's first hospitality committee? Like Paul

says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Would Philip ace the audition? I don't know. I know I wouldn't, but I am eternally grateful for those saints who do. They come with names like Emily, Terry, Dick, Ruth Ann, Dave, Tim, Patty, Linda, Ann, Nancy, and the list goes on and on. We can't pass go without their gift for hospitality. But it is not just their operational wizardry that marries food, fellowship, and faith in ways that nourish and enrich us. They know what Jesus wanted Philip and Andrew to comprehend.

I love Philip and Andrew's reactions to Jesus' queries. They are so authentic, real, and echo the humor I've heard in exchanged in countless committee conversations. "[Pffft!] Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

5,000 people, that's a monumental endeavor, and Philip and Andrew approach it with the acerbic humor of runners at the beginning of a marathon, stonemasons upon the receipt of Qin Shi Huang's

demand for a Great Wall, or window washers at One World Trade Center. Fish for 5000? We're gonna need a bigger boat! There may be groans and sighs, but that doesn't stop them from lacing up their shoes and getting to work. Trust their abilities. Trust their colleagues. Trust the mission. Oh, and do not forget that which is most important in the work and mission of the church, trust the Lord who makes all things possible, who provides the strength and vision, who transforms skepticism into hope, discouragement into joy, weakness into strength, restlessness into purpose, death into life.

There is a seemingly minor, yet highly significant difference between John's version of the feeding of the 5000 and that of the other gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the disciples see the crowd forming and conclude it is time to punt. "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." These voices represent the spirit of all who assume they know more than God about what is and is not possible. It's not a select crowd, for at various points along the journey we each fall into it. Gloom merchants, doom-mongers, wet-blanket skeptics, cynical self-appointed gatekeepers. "Won't happen

in a million years. You'll fall flat on your face. We tried that before and it didn't work. Not a ghost of a chance. A fool's errand. Negatory, Nada, No. Nope." ... But, if you've made up your mind before reaching the starting line, why bother.

Here in John, while the disciples don't know how this will turn out and may have their doubts, they at least trust the Lord enough to give it a shot. Think about what it means for someone to tell you, "I can't see how we'll accomplish it, but I believe in you, and that's enough." Kierkegaard said, "Hope is a passion for the possible."

Our assessment of a task is not nearly as important as who it is asking us to do it. You can probably name a couple of folks for whom you would not hesitate to attempt whatever they ask of you. It doesn't matter if it succeeds. What matters is your willingness to try, your willingness to trust, your openness to their grasp of possibility.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

5,000 people. 5 loaves. 2 fish (and we're not talking about those flounders that are the size of Volkswagens). 5K and nothing more than a pupu platter. Go crazy folks!

I've always been a bit of a realist, but perhaps I, perhaps we give too much power to words like insurmountable, unsurvivable, irredeemable, impossible.

"Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted." It is no accident John uses the very words we continue to use each time we gather at the Lord's table. We'll even use the precise Greek root word that John employs, εὐχαριστέω, give thanks. For isn't the Lord's table a sign of the holy infusing the ordinary with meaning, the meager with abundance? John mentions something here that we in a land of affluence too often miss. John says, "he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, **as much as they wanted.**"

We spend most of our time trying to discipline ourselves not to eat as much as we want. Yet, what we take for granted, a frightening percentage of the world rarely, if ever, experiences. "As much as they

wanted." Do you realize that 821 million people in the world don't get the food they need to live a healthy life? 821 million people never hear someone say, "Take as much as you want." Jimmy Carter said, "We know that a peaceful world cannot exist one-third rich and two-thirds hungry." 821 million. Insurmountable? An effort to erase that figure is inconceivable? Who would even think we could make a dent in that? In the other Gospels, Jesus greets the disciples' skepticism with a challenge. When they tell Jesus to send the people away, Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."

"He distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, **as much as they wanted.**" Remember, our assessment of a task is not nearly as important as who it is asking us to do it. It doesn't matter if it succeeds. What matters is your willingness to try, your willingness to trust, your openness to their grasp of possibility.

The text doesn't tell us whether the abundance of food was the result of Jesus just snapping his fingers or if the massive banquet was a consequence of Jesus' Spirit and a young boy's generosity moving the people to share what they had brought for themselves.

Many here and at home have seen with their own eyes how this can work. They participated in a Stop Hunger Now or Rise Against Hunger event over in Mecklenburg Hall. With volunteers, aged 4 to 94, each person had the chance to package 250 meals in 2 hours, which means 50 volunteers can package 12,500! Remember, with each 1000 meals, we'd bang the gong.

Walter Brueggemann said, "God's speech is an invitation to us to participate in the healing of the world, living to create blessing. That task is done in many ways and by many means. Conservatives want to bless their neighbor through the private sector. [Progressives] want to bless their neighbor by government policy. Generous people want to bless by concrete neighborly acts. The vision is of all kinds of people in all kinds of ways, many strategies, many daring acts of imagination, many gestures of kindness and generosity, many commitments to peace and justice in the world. To cause blessing is to transmit God's power for life that God gives us to others." (Walter Brueggemann, *Gospel of Hope*)

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willingness to try, your willingness to trust, your openness to the Jesus' grasp of possibility. Amen.